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This is a scene from an historical novel that takes place at the end of the American civil war. It introduces Tom Meagher who was an actual historical figure, an Irish immigrant to America who rose to the rank of General in the Union army and led the Irish Brigade through most of the war. The Brigade was known for its fierce fighting men and its losses, and now, at the end of the war, it's being disbanded and Meagher and his wife Libby are going to be attending the ceremony.

THE IRISHMAN

New York City, June 1865

Tom Meagher fingered the worn green silk of the flag propped in the corner of his bedroom. Wide swaths of the gold fringe that bordered it were missing, the tassels filthy, stained with smoke. He thought he could still smell the acrid scent of sulfur. He stretched the material gently so as not to exacerbate the tears where minie balls had burned through; even the embroidered harp in the center was riddled. The red banner printed across the top, though, still glowed with bright letters spelling out "Irish Brigade," the motto about never retreating still clear.

He dropped the silk, turned to Libby's dressing table, poured two fingers of bourbon and sipped. One thing about living in his father-in-law's house: good Kentucky bourbon was always on offer. He moved to the window, pushed aside the heavy velvet drape. Fifth Avenue bustled at this hour of the day, business concluding, dinner engagements looming, theaters preparing to open. This evening the crowd swelled with the addition of dozens, hundreds, of recently mustered-out soldiers, privates in faded blue sack coats and smashed forage caps, officers in double-breasted frock coats much too hot for June in the city. He squinted to catch sight of the regimental numbers and corps badges fixed to caps and coat collars, but he was

too high up and his eyesight wasn't what it used to be. There went a red-striped artillery man. A tidy cavalryman trotted by on a big, healthy-looking bay; that one hadn't seen much action.

He realized he stood in full view in his small clothes and jerked back. His drink sloshed and he licked his fingers, then downed the rest. Libby had laid out his uniform on the bed, brushed and mended. It was the one he'd worn last time he visited the President.

Lincoln was dead now. Lincoln and Tom Smyth. Dick Byrnes, Michael Corcoran. Even that little drummer boy, what was his name, O'Malley or O'Mear, killed at Chancellorsville like so many of them. He ran a hand over the black velvet cuff. He would wear it once more, then it would be packed in mothballs and tucked away in the chest under the eaves, the War Chest Libby called it, where he'd stowed the old red and blue Zouave uniform and the blouse he'd designed when he first commanded Company K, and all the gold lace and gilt. Overseeing each detail of his uniforms had given him particular pleasure these past four years; he especially liked the green velvet outfit he wore at Savage Station, like Irish sod it was. No Washington bureaucrat ever dared tell him what was regulation.

Libby had gone ahead to Hibernian Hall to oversee the final arrangements for the Brigade's mustering-out ceremony. Even those bastards at the *Irish Times* couldn't stop Thomas Francis Meagher from organizing this one. He'd organized every St. Patrick's banquet, every steeplechase, every ceremony for his Brigade ever since '61, even after the army'd booted him from command. Even after there was hardly any Brigade left to celebrate. This was my Brigade, goddamn it, I saw it formed, I watched it die, I'll see it disbanded. The flag's sitting here in my bedroom, isn't it? They brought it to me, not to Bob Nugent. Not to old Denny Heenan or that pup whats-'is-name, the fella who took over after they pushed me out.

He poured himself another slosh of bourbon, gulped it down.

They brought it home to me.

He stepped into his trousers and buttoned up. Slipped on his coat. Poured another drink.

Hibernian Hall sweltered in the late June heat. Stuffed between two five-story buildings that blocked any possible breeze, its wide windows stood open to the stagnant evening air, to the odors of game hanging to ripen in the butcher shops along the back alley, to the noise of passing hacks and the dust of dried horse leavings. Meagher ran a finger under his collar and wished he could undo the top button. But he sat on the dais, dead center of the head table, where all the Brigade could see him. Libby sat next to him and bless her, she looked as cool and comfortable as he wished he felt. Never a real drop of sweat on that woman, though a sheen of feminine dampness coated her bare shoulders, a lovely glow. How had he got so lucky in his wife? Luck of the Irish.

A waiter slid the fish course in front of him, trout complete with head and bulging eyes, and his stomach contracted. Another server filled his second wine glass with a white. He sipped it; cold. Wonder where they got ice in this heat? Libby would have seen to it. The men seated at trundle tables on the floor of the hall drank warm beer, but that didn't seem to stop them. Nugent made sure there were plenty of kegs. They laughed and chattered and joshed and cussed, looking over their shoulders at Libby with a smirk, half abashed. She smiled on them. This was her regiment, they'd adopted her as sponsor. Meagher burst with pride at how his men loved her as one of their own.

Heenan was here with some of his Pennsylvania boys. Good boys, the way they fought at Fredericksburg especially, running for the heights. Straight into Rebel fire, never a flinch.

Posted to the . . . left was it? Over that embankment one by one. Scattered over it like crabs, bullets raining down on them. Heenan, Heenan's hand wrapped in a bloody cloth. Had his sword in his good hand, revolver in the bloody one. Over the top and into the canal. One thing after another, I remember that's what I thought in the middle of all that. One thing after another. Watermelon. Where the hell'd that come from? Watermelon. That's what it looked like, some fella's head, split in two by a missile, clean and pink as fresh watermelon sliced open with a knife.

He sipped wine again, dabbed his handkerchief over his forehead. Damned hot in here. Nugent was speaking. Speeches have started, the men are cheering. He closed his eyes; need to collect my thoughts. I'll give the major speech. It's my Brigade. These are my Irish boys. Cheering, cheering for Nugent, for Heenan, for O'Neill. Cheering like he heard from the heights that day. Who's cheering? Not our boys, our boys are being mowed down like wheat under a scythe, no time to cheer, no reason. Someone's cheering. The Rebs and damme if they ain't cheering for us! Cheers and whistles—why, they admire us! That's right, you show em boys, you show em what Irishmen are made of, all guts and blarney and courage, dumb-fuck courage under that green flag.

The room spun. Libby's hand lay soft on his arm, her fine eyes filled with care. Through the hum, the rush of wind inside his head, he heard her whisper. Am I ill? Should I step out? Hell, no, I'll not step out, not leave my men under fire.

I have a speech to give.

He took the hanky she offered, damp, she'd dunked it in her water glass. Patted the sweat from his forehead, from his moustache.

I have a speech to give.

